

From the founding days of the shortgrass country onward, generation lines blur in my mind. Tracing one of the branches of the family tree, greatest of great grandfather makes five generations that have been ranching out here. Taking another branch, four generations looks right. The important part, nowadays, is when are we going to be cured of the disease.

Old tally books lost in the bunkhouse fire for the paternal and maternal side showed a burst of activity in the first decade of the last century. Not only were livestock counts recorded in the tablets, labor accounts on sheepherders and cowboys were included. One entry dated May of 1902 by Grandfather Noelke read, "Killed 42 deer to winter herders on Devil's River camp." A shorter note in marking chalk on my maternal grandfather's saddle house door said, "Lost 440 goats the first night of Aug. 08."

Evidence is scant of when the Mexicans started working on this side of the Big River. The year of 1917 comes to mind as the end of the open ranges and the beginning of the woven wire fences in our country. From what I know, the oldtime Mexicans made natural herders. At first, they knew more about hard work than they did money, coming from a peon (slave) system. Tracing entries of advancing money in the account books proves, however, that herders soon began to show great talent in deficit financing. Before the gringos caught on (and the majority of us haven't to this day), the

Mexicans developed a loan program assuring job security by staying six months overdrawn.

Amazing thing is, borrowed money was high-priced. Recorded at the courthouse, for example, are deeds of trust made after World War I bearing interest rates of 21 percent from private lenders in Central Texas German communities. However, in the same decade, the wagon cook, Pedro Vidales, owed Grandfather Noelke \$110 interest-free, secured by an act of faith valid as long as Pedro stayed 150 miles north of the nearest source of sotol liquor at Villa Acuna, Coahuila, Mexico. (Before Grandfather Noelke died, he raised Pedro's salary \$110 for one month to balance his books. I'll have to look, but I think Pedro reappeared in the red in the debt column on Grandfather's estate tax return. I know Pedro Navarro and Candelario Gomez made the list, along with a sizeable delegation of African Americans employed as domestics.)

After the present-day passport hands began to finance cars and TVs with GMAC and retail store credit, a lot of our unsecured business disappeared, including our help. A few ranchers continued to compete with the jugs and the pawnshops. One of my partners west of the ranch came out of retirement a Christmas or so ago to loan a cowboy \$200 against a \$500 saddle. Only catch in the collateral was that by the 27th of December, her customer needed his saddle back to help her son round up sheep. The loan's status the last I heard showed an outstanding balance of \$200, a missing \$500

used saddle, and a mortgagee thought to be working in the oilfield.

The ranch took the lead in loaning money way back. We still hold title to the field of confiscated collateral. In the decade of the 70s, I advanced a trapper living at the ranch \$100 against a 30-30 Winchester saddle carbine. Before I gained possession, one of the trapper's pals was shot by his girlfriend with my collateral, the 30-30. The Texas Ranger assigned the case seized the gun as evidence. Next, the trapper stopped running his traps, grief-stricken over his wounded friend and his confiscated rifle.

But better times were to come. The old boy who was shot recovered. His girl friend was released to be his nurse. And I was left at the ranch, holding a hundred bucks of paper against a bedroll at the bunkhouse and 50 traps scattered over that many square miles.

At first, I smarted at losing the chance of owning such a neat little saddlegun. After thinking how many times I'd been overcome by a soft spot for hard luck hombres, I was glad the gun was in the hands of the Rangers. Once charges were dropped against the girlfriend, the ranger explained that we needed to go through the simple court hearing to recover seized property. As long as no one objected, the judge could grant me the rifle. With the trapper on leave, and his pal recuperating at his ranch, the field looked clear. I do remember the judge calling the victim to see how

he felt about releasing the gun. He replied, "Judge, I don't want any more collateral that shoots."

The point now isn't the genealogy of the ranch families. Continuing the chain of title on the lands is going to be the big challenge. Trust departments and spoiled heirs cash in Grandpa and Grandma's heritage every business day of the week. Seems to be a race that we old herders can't run to see how long it takes to spend that much dough on the stock market and with the IRS ...